DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 146 RC 021 245

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TITLE The Operations of Kentucky Rural School Councils.
PUB DATE 1997-09-00
NOTE 24p.; In: The Many Faces of Rural Education. Proceedings of the Annual NREA Convention (89th, Tucson, AZ, September 24-27, 1997); see RC 021 239.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Decentralization; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Parent Participation; *Participative Decision Making; *Rural Schools; *School Based Management; School Community Relationship; *School Restructuring; School Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Kentucky; Kentucky Education Reform Act 1990; *School Councils

ABSTRACT

School councils, a school-based decision making (SBDM) form of governance, are mandated for Kentucky public schools by the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). Commonly composed of the principal, three teachers, and two parents, the school council is designed to be a form of democratic or shared school governance. The missions of school councils are prescribed in KERA and include the areas of instruction, administration, and personnel. A random survey of 252 Kentucky rural schools was conducted to investigate what missions their school councils undertook, what benefits these schools had gained from SBDM, and what problems the councils were facing. From the 132 school councils that responded, it was found that approximately 20 percent of the school councils undertook all missions specified by the law, and the majority of councils undertook most missions. Some of the missions were undertaken by various district offices, principals, or school committees. The schools had benefitted from their councils making concrete policies, promoting communication, addressing student needs, identifying priority problems, reviewing curriculum, selecting personnel, and using resources efficiently. Main problems included lack of staff and parental involvement, poor understanding of legal requirements, weakness in coordinating committees, short-term vision, time constraints, unequal membership status, lack of focus on instruction-related matters, lack of efficiency, functioning as a rubber stamp, little contribution from parent members, and lots of politics on councils. Contains 22 references and the survey questionnaire. (Author/TD)

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ED 413 146

THE OPERATIONS OF KENTUCKY RURAL SCHOOL COUNCILS

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Paper presented at the Research Forum of the National Rural Education Association Annual Meeting, Tucson, AZ, Sept. 24-27, 1997.

RC 021246

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Abstract

School council, a SBDM form of governance, is mandated for Kentucky public schools by the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). The missions of school councils are prescribed in KERA. A random survey of 252 Kentucky rural schools was conducted to investigate what missions school councils in Kentucky rural schools undertook, what benefits these schools had gained from SBDM and what problems the councils were facing. 132 school councils participated in the survey. It was found that approximately 20% of the school councils undertook all the missions specified by the law, and the majority of the councils undertook most of the missions. Some of the missions were undertaken by various district offices, principals or school committees. The schools had benefited from councils' making concrete policies, promoting communication, addressing students' needs, etc. Main problems that various councils were facing included: lack of staff and parental involvement, time constraint, lack of equal status in membership, lack of focus on instruction related matters and lack of efficiency, etc.

The Operations of Kentucky Rural School Councils

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was passed in 1990. Under KERA, the state's entire school system was restructured. Accordingly, major reform programs such as ungraded primary, performance-based assessment, extended school program and school-based decision making (SBDM), etc. have been implemented in Kentucky public schools.

The guiding premise of SBDM is that school principals, teachers and parents are the ones who best understand the contexts, and cultures of the school. Accordingly, these people are to be represented on the school councils (Guskey & Peterson, 1995).

SBDM in Kentucky public schools, according to KERA, works through a council commonly composed of the principal, three teachers and two parents, and they make decisions on how to help their students learn. The SBDM process gives parents, teachers, and principals substantial control over how that school operates, and allows each school to figure out the best way to move its students toward the seven state-wide KERA goals for student success. For staff, SBDM is an opportunity to control their own situation; for parents, SBDM is a chance to make a major contribution to their children's future (Weston, 1993).

SBDM is also intended to change the culture within each school, because teachers, parents who create the programs should have far greater enthusiasm for making them work. In short, SBDM is designed to be a form of democratic or shared school governance.

According to KERA, rules on how the school councils will be formed are generally set by district school boards. These rules specify the process for how council election will be handled. Even though SBDM is a KERA mandate, a

school can also stop the SBDM, according to KERA, but only under limited conditions: A school must first produce student success level higher than the thresholds set for them by the Kentucky State Board For Elementary And Secondary Education. Then its faculty can vote to apply to the State Board to leave SBDM and return to administration from the central office. Schools meeting or falling below their thresholds are not eligible to leave the SBDM process (Kentucky Revised Statutes, 160.345(5), 1990).

The Kentucky SBDM law prescribes a list of functions (missions) to school councils: make decisions on curriculum and schedule, the use of school space, instructional practices and discipline issues, the assignment of instructional and noninstructional staff time, the assignment of students to classes and programs, etc. School councils also have a more general policy-making role: to set school policies consistent with district board policy, state and federal laws and regulations (Weston, 1993). In summary, school councils' functions include three general areas: instruction, administration, and personnel.

SBDM has been a popular governance option across this country. Many states have adopted SBDM as part of their reform practice. Research literature on SBDM addresses various issues and has contributed substantial knowledge on this form of school governance in practice. The issue of principal's leadership over a 3-year period in four elementary schools that implemented SBDM was examined by Haskin (1995). Her findings indicated that successful implementation of SBDM began with effective principal leadership. A facilitative leadership style was most compatible with SBDM. A facilitative principal shared decision making responsibilities on issues related to school management and administration, encouraged the development of relationship

within the nonadministrative staff, and fostered a school climate of trust and efficacy. The principal also needed the support of some committed staff. She also found that female principals tended to have greater success with facilitative leadership. Blase, Blase, Anderson and Dungan (1995) had similar findings: Obstacles to shared governance in SBDM included the individual principal's characteristics, time, teachers, and central district administration.

The benefits of implementing SBDM has also been studied. Meister (1994) investigated a revised version of SBDM program called school-based instructional decision making (SBIDM), which was implemented in the regional centers' service area in Maryland. Meister found that the (SBIDM) teams worked collaboratively to reach decisions, used consensus-building techniques, produced plans and generally implemented their plans. Participants reported that they and their schools had gained significant benefits from SBIDM. Most of these benefits were related to the cooperative planning process. Increased involvement from parents, teachers and students was found to be needed, and more time, money, staff training and ideas as well. These findings were similar to those of Blase and colleagues' (1995).

One of the SBDM research areas is on challenges that schools with SBDM encountered. Peterson, Gok and Warren (1995) studied SBDM in 24 schools and identified some of the challenges associated with implementing SBDM. They found that the principals faced three particular challenges when implementing SBDM: (1) developing a clear, shared educational vision; (2) developing effective decision-making and governance processes; and (3) building well-functioning teams. Their findings suggest that implementing the SBDM program can be a real challenging task for any school.

With the Barnette and Hange's (1994) study, the operations and activities of faculty senates for the years of 1990 to 1993 were examined through a survey to the delegates of the West Virginia Education Association Delegate Assemblies. The respondents indicated an increasing faculty involvement in SBDM; however, they expressed declining support to decisions and less satisfaction with senate operations within the 3-year period. It was also found that for the schools practicing SBDM in West Virginia, there was a need for training, role clarification, and greater support from the school and district.

Whether implementing SBDM has achieved real shared governance was investigated by the Parents Coalition For Education In New York City (1993). It was found that the New York City version of SBDM failed to bring real SBDM to the schools. In New York, SBDM turned out be a cautious, politically correct, insider's version of school restructuring, with only weak teacher involvement, and token parental involvement. The SBDM component had not delegated any authority from the community school boards of the central bureaucracy.

In a study by Case (1993), the cognitive constraints of participating teachers involved in SBDM were examined through interviews with 34 teachers at a rural high school in Connecticut. These teachers perceived that the majority of their decisions were made under cognitive constraints and indicated a lack of adequate information and time. They attributed time constraints to a lack of administrative support. Quick changes in the structure of school governance caused confusion for teachers. Some teachers reported operating under "pseudo decision-making--the decision is actually made by the administrator in charge." This finding is similar to those reported by the Parents Coalition

For Education In New York City (1993).

The issue of parent involvement in SBDM in selected Texas secondary schools was examined by Schaeffer and Betz (1992). Their findings indicated that parent participation in SBDM (budgeting, staffing patterns, curriculum, etc.) was limited and generally not desired by school personnel or parents. However, parents' lack of involvement was due to misunderstandings, not a lack of time.

The effects of using school-based participatory decision making to improve services for low achieving students were examined by Jenkins, Ronk, Schrag, Rude and Stowitschek (1994). A reform program composed of a host of intervention strategies generated through the SBDM process was implemented for one year. Measures of teachers' perceptions, students' achievement, and teachers' ratings of students' behavior were obtained from 72 teachers and 1,362 students in 12 experimental schools, and from 76 teachers and 1,062 students in 10 control schools. Results indicated that the intervention program resulted in positive teacher attitudes toward the change process, in new approaches to organizing instruction, and in more mainstreamed instruction. However, no treatment effects on students' achievement and behavior were found.

Literature also includes studies on various aspects related to SBDM implementation in Kentucky. Teachers' attitudes toward SBDM were investigated by Daniel and Shay (1995). Two hundred twenty-eight teachers in 12 Kentucky SBDM schools and non-SBDM schools were surveyed. The data indicated that teachers in SBDM schools tended to report more positive attitudes toward SBDM than those at non-SBDM schools did. However, neither group reported negative attitudes toward this management approach. In another survey, Logan (1992)

found that 2/3 of the school personnel surveyed believed SBDM improved the quality of decision making during the initial year of operation. It seems that teachers generally are not resistant to this form of school governance.

Like teachers, Kentucky parents were found to be enthusiastic about SBDM (David, 1994). The number of parents running for school councils and voting in election was small; most school councils had little teamwork or representative experience, and few councils dealt with the learning related topics. Still, participants were enthusiastic.

The development of a working relationship among council members at the end of one pilot-year was investigated by Lindle (1992). Two hundred eleven pilot-year school council members responded to the survey. It was found that principals tended to express the most satisfaction with communication, although in general respondents were optimistic about the potential of school councils.

The lessons learned about SBDM by Kentucky school councils were summarized by Lindle (1996). According to Lindle, they had learned that their councils must represent their local constituencies, gain the support of local political structures, shun legalism, concentrate on substantive education issues, and develop a democratically based decision making process.

With respect to how schools councils operated, Kannapel, Moore, Coe and Aagaard (1994) reported on 10 of the 20 rural schools in four school districts that had adopted SBDM. Seven schools began the formal implementation in 1991-92 school year. Only one of the seven school councils practiced balanced decision making where all members participated as equals in decisions and discussions. In three councils, teachers and principals dominated decision making, although parents at two of the schools had begun to play a stronger

role. The remaining three councils served as advisory groups to the principal, or made rubber-stamped decisions. Councils that practiced some level of shared decision making made key decisions in budgeting, scheduling, and to some extent, curriculum. All councils participated in decisions about personnel and, to some extent, discipline. Principals' support and facilitation of SBDM, leadership by other council members, attentiveness to the need for parent involvement and council training were found to be factors that contributed to effective SBDM implementation.

Similar findings were reported by Kannapel, Moore, Coe and Aagaard in 1995. They investigated whether true shared governance was achieved by councils in four Kentucky rural districts. Likewise, they found that SBDM councils in rural schools experienced difficulties in achieving true shared decision making.

With respect to the link of decision making to student performance, David (1995) reported a study of SBDM that focused on early examples (13 schools) of connections between council decision making and changes in curriculum and instruction. Findings indicated that councils were tackling more complex issues. But most council decisions continued to have a non-academic focus.

Whether the SBDM process helped students achieve better was investigated by the Kentucky School Boards Association (1996). The study reported that with respect to KIRIS (a Kentucky state testing program) scores, non-SBDM Kentucky schools showed greater improvement in achievement than the SBDM schools did. The SBDM schools did not achieve at the level of non-SBDM schools. The above literature review reveals that a variety of problems exist in SBDM practices, which are keeping SBDM from improving teaching and learning (Guskey &

Peterson, 1996).

According to KERA, by July 1, 1996, all Kentucky schools will establish councils in their schools, except a number of schools that are exempt from implementing SBDM by the Kentucky State Board For Elementary And Secondary Education. Before the summer of 1996, school councils had already been in operation in over 2/3 of the Kentucky public schools.

The purpose of this study was to investigate what missions Kentucky rural school councils undertook, what benefits these schools had gained from implementing SBDM, and what problems these councils were facing.

Method

A survey was conducted to collect data relevant to the research questions.

Participants

Current school council members were surveyed. For one school council, the survey included the principal member, one teacher member and one parent member.

Procedure

A randomized stratified sampling was conducted via the Kentucky Schools Directory (Kentucky Department of Education, 1996-1997), starting with the first school in the Directory. Approximately one in every four rural schools was selected. To insure that small school districts have an equal chance to participate, one school from every small district with fewer than four schools was selected. A total of 252 rural schools were selected via this sampling process.

For each surveyed council member, the survey package included one introductory letter, one questionnaire and one reply-envelope. A big envelope

containing three such packages was mailed out to each of the school principals with his/her name printed along with the address. The names and addresses were copied from the Directory. The purpose of the survey was explained to each of the members in the introductory letter. The principal was requested in the letter to help distribute one package to a teacher member, one package to a parent member.

All three reply-envelopes were coded with a same number in pencil marks printed at the left upper corner of the reply-envelopes. The number code represented only an individual school, and the coding was for analyzing or comparing the council members' responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire or to the situations in the same school.

Instrument

The survey questions were developed based on the Kentucky Educational Reform Act--The Kentucky Revised Statutes, Section 160.345, which determines the missions of school councils:

1. Make policy to enhance achievement and KERA goals;
2. Determine the number of persons employed in each job classification;
3. Select textbooks;
4. Select instructional materials;
5. Select student support services;
6. Select new principal;
7. Consult with principal before he or she selects persons to fill out vacancies;
8. Make curriculum policy;
9. Make staff assignment policy;
10. Make student assignment policy;

11. Make school schedule policy;
12. Make school space use policy;
13. Make instructional practices policy;
14. Make discipline and classroom management policy;
15. Make extra-curriculum policy;
16. Make policy for determining alignment with state standards, technology use and program appraisal.

Following the above questions, open-ended questions were also included to collect information on benefits the schools had gained, and problems the councils were facing in their SBDM practices (see Appendix).

Results

Out of 252 (N=252) Kentucky rural schools surveyed, 132 schools responded. The return rate was 52 percent. One survey was returned from each of the 103 schools , and two or three council members participated from each of the 24 schools, 5 schools were exempt from forming SBDM. Totally, 169 surveys were returned: 51 principals, 69 teachers, 44 parents, 5 non-member principals. The major findings follow.

As to whether these school councils made policies to enhance KERA goals, 89% of the councils did such job; this job was done by school districts according to 1.6% of the schools; by principals, in 1.6% of the schools; by school committees, in 1% of the schools. The rest of schools reported "Can not tell."

With respect to who determined the number of persons to be employed for each job classification, 64% of the councils made such decisions; council members in 16% of the schools reported that their districts made the

decisions; in 2.4% of schools, principals made such decisions; in 6.3% of the schools, such decisions were made by school committees. The rest of councils provided no information on this issue.

In regard to textbook selection, 66% of the councils did such work, and 24% of the councils approved recommendations on textbooks from school committees or departments. As to selecting instructional materials, 46% of the school councils did so, and in 40% of the schools this job was done by departments or committees. Student support services were selected by 67% of the school councils; the same job was done at district level according to 15% of the schools. Curriculum policy was made by 86% of the school councils; this policy was made by district offices according to council members in 4% of the schools, and by school committees in 4% of the schools.

Seventy-eight percent of the school councils were responsible in selecting new principals; districts were doing such job according to 5.5% of the schools; school committees selected new principals in 6.3% of the schools. Staff assignment policy was made by 55% of the councils; principals made such assignment in 19% of the schools; districts made such decisions according to 7% of the schools. Student assignment policy was made by 60% of the councils; principals made such policy in 19% of the schools; departments or committees made this policy in 9.4% of the schools.

School schedule policy was made by 65% of the councils; districts made such policy according to council members in 9.4% of the schools; principals made the policy in 12% of the schools; departments or committees did so in 8% of the schools. As to school space use, 72% of the councils made such policy; district offices made this policy according to council members in 3% of the schools; principals made the policy in 12% of the schools.

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With respect to making instructional practices policy, 74% of the councils were responsible for this; district offices made the policy according to council members in 5.5% of the schools; principals made this policy in 4.7% of the schools; departments or committees did so in 6.3% of the schools. As to discipline and classroom management policies, 78% of the councils made the policies; district offices made these policies according to members in 6.3% of the schools; principals did so in 5.5% of the schools; committees did this job in 8% of the schools.

The extra-curriculum policy was made by 75% of the councils; and this policy was made at district level according to council members in 4% of the schools; principals made such policy in 4% of the schools; committees made this policy in 2.4% of the schools. With regard to the policy on alignment with state standards, technology use and program appraisal, 76% of the councils made such policy; districts made the policy according to council members in 5.5% of the schools. Lastly, 92% of the councils reported that they met regularly to conduct duties. In summary, the data indicated that 19% of all 127 councils actually undertook all the missions prescribed by KERA.

The following is a summary of the responses from all 127 school councils to the open-ended questions (Questions 18 to 22). In regard to the areas where the school council did a good job, council members from various schools responded: making concrete policies, promoting communication between staff and parents, identifying priority problems the school was facing, addressing the school/student needs immediately, curriculum review and extracurriculum, selecting personnel, using resources to the maximum, budgeting, etc.

The weaknesses shown by various councils were: lack of (non-member) faculty and parental involvement, lack of understanding of legal requirements,

showing weakness in coordinating committees, having a short-term vision, lack of focus on instructional matters or being bogged down on non-instructional matters, lack of efficiency, having little power or functioning as rubber stamp, parent members adding little to decision making, a lot of politics on councils, etc.

Mixed responses were provided by various council members to the issues of effectiveness and efficiency of the SBDM practices: Members from 2/3 of the councils provided positive answers, and 1/3 of them said "no" to the effectiveness issue; however, most of these members responded "not efficient."

As to the working time spent by various councils, the findings were: on administrative issues, the range was 1 to 95% of the councils' working time, the average was 26%; on personnel issues, the range was 1 to 40%, and the average was 14%; on instruction-related issues, the range was 5 to 90%, and the average was 34%; on other issues, the range was 3 to 85% and the average was 16%.

In terms of the benefits gained by various schools from council's work, the responses were: Students, parents and teachers had more ownership; more funds were available; more people were involved; stakeholders had more active roles in education; decisions were no longer made by one person; schools had better schedules; a variety of issues were addressed by councils that had never been addressed before, etc.

With respect to the problems that various councils were facing, the answers were: little staff support and involvement; not enough time for performing duties; many parents being too busy to get involved; to make the principal realize that he/she is only an equal member; not having a focus on curriculum and instructional practices; not having effective discipline in

school; the process being too slow; many decisions being made at district level, etc. The data also indicated that new councils (formed within one year) faced more challenges than those formed for four or five years.

Twenty-four sets of questionnaires were returned: Each set consisted of 2 or 3 surveys from 1 school council. A comparison of the responses among the members (principals, teachers and parents) indicated that parents provided the most positive answers to Questions 18, 20, 22; no parents supplied negative responses to Question 20; more teachers (as a group) than principals (as a group) responded positively to Question 20.

Discussion

The data indicated that in some Kentucky rural school councils, principals were still the dominant decision-makers, which generated the so-called "rubber stamp syndrome." This phenomenon was also found in other places (Case, 1993; Parents Coalition For Education In New York City, NY, 1993). The data also showed that in a number of schools, some parent members reported that teacher members did not regard parent members as equal members, which suggests that the unequal membership phenomenon takes more than one form in Kentucky rural school councils' practices. Achieving a true shared governance in day-to-day operations may still be a goal to be reached by some Kentucky rural school councils.

The ultimate goal of implementing SBDM is to help students improve learning or to move students toward the seven state-wide KERA goals for student success. Yet the data showed that the amount of working time spent on academic matters by Kentucky rural school councils differed from school to school. This suggests that different school councils had different priorities. Some councils spent more time on administrative matters, some did so on

personnel issues, some councils spent more time on other matters, but few councils used most of the working time on instruction related matters. It seems that re-establishing priorities remains a task to be accomplished by most of the councils.

Many participating council members reported that few school staff and parents would like to run for council membership or get involved in council business, because they were already too busy or "(their) hands are already tied." Limited parental and teacher involvement in SBDM practices may hinder the functioning of a true shared governance. Apparently, efforts need to be made by school councils to improve parental and teacher involvement in SBDM in many Kentucky rural schools.

The data indicated that some of the missions prescribed by KERA for school councils were run at district level or by principals. It is unknown why this is so. The data also revealed that school councils with longer service years functioned more effectively and efficiently than those formed within one year. This may suggest that SBDM had been a learning experience or a developmental process for many council members. They functioned better with more experiences obtained.

It is interesting to know that parent and teacher members held more positive opinions about their councils' performances, and approximately 2/3 of participating principals had similar opinions. This may suggest that SBDM was popular among most of the rural council members, while 1/3 of the participating principals did not consider SBDM to have done a better job than the previous form of governance in their schools did.

Conclusion

Implementing SBDM in Kentucky public schools is a major educational

reform project. The Kentucky Education Reform Act has determined the missions of school councils. However, the findings of the study indicated that a small percentage of Kentucky rural school councils actually undertook all of the missions or tasks prescribed by KERA. In various schools, some of the missions were conducted at the district level, by principals or by school committees, or rather, most of these councils did not handle some of the missions prescribed by KERA. It was also found that more parent council members than teacher members held positive views toward the performance of their school councils, and more teacher members than principal members had such opinions. For the schools, the main gains from council's performance included making concrete policies, address concrete issues, address students' needs, and shared governance, etc. The main problems that various school councils were facing, were: little staff and parental involvement, time constraint, lack of focus on instruction-related matters, lack of equal status in membership, lack of efficiency, and many policies being made at district level, etc.

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Appendix

Questionnaire For School Council Members

You are a: principal_____, parent_____, teacher_____.

Your school level: Elementary____, Middle____, High____.

Please respond to whether your school council does the following jobs: (Code references: Y = Yes, N = No, C = Can't tell)

1. In what year was your school council formed? _____

2. Does your school council make policies to enhance achievement and KERA goals? Y____; N___; C___.
   If not, who does the job? (specify)_____

3. Are the number of persons employed in each job classification determined by your school council? Y___; N___; C___;
   If not, by whom? _____

4. Does your school council select textbooks for your school?
   Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does? _____

5. Are other instructional materials selected by the council?
   Y___; N___; C___; If not, by whom? _____

6. Are student support services selected by your school council?
   Y___; N___; C___; If not, by whom? _____

7. Is your school council responsible in selecting new principal?
   Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does this job? _____

8. Curriculum policy in your school is made by your school council?
   Y___; N___; C___; If not, by whom?_____

9. Does your school council make staff assignment policy?
   Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does this job?_____

10. Does your school council make student assignment policy?
    Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does this job? _____

11. Does your school council make school schedule policy?
    Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does this job?_____

12. Does your school council make school space use policy?
    Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does the job? _____

13. Does your school council make instructional practices policy?
    Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does the job?_____

14. Does your school council make discipline and classroom management policies? Y___; N___; C___;
If not, who does this job?_____

15. Does your school council make extra-curriculum policy?
Y___; N___; C___; If not, who does this job? _____

16. Does your school council make policy for determining alignment with state standards, technology use and program appraisal?
Y___; N___; C____;
If not, who does the job? _____

17. Does your school council meet regularly to conduct its duties?
Y___; N___; C___.

Please respond to the following questions.

18. In what area (s), do you think your school council does a good job? (Please specify.)

19. In what area (s), do you think your school council shows weakness in doing its jobs? (Please specify.)

20. Do you think your school council does a better job in governing than the previous form of school governance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness?

21. To your best knowledge, how much time does your school council spend on the following issues?
Administrative issues: _____ % of the working time;
Personnel related issues: _____ % of the working time;
Instruction related issues: _____ % of the working time.
Other issues: _____ % of the working time.

22. Please make comments on what benefits the school has gained from the council's work so far and what problems the council is presently facing.

Thank you for your time and help!